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SPATIAL PLANNING CHALLENGES - IMPRESSIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The specific Flemish spatial context of excessively fragmented urban growth – and as a logical consequence the context of continuous fragmentation of Flemish open space – offers quasi ‘laboratory conditions’ for research on spatial planning challenges and solutions for rural areas in urbanising or urbanised contexts. This implies that planning interventions in Flemish open space fragments have a national and international learning potential. That is also why interventions and challenges for Flemish spatial planning policy served as a starting point for a debate between the workshop participants – from Flanders as well as abroad.

The debate during the workshop was outlined through the following three topics:

- the planning story lines on ‘rurality near the city’ – or appropriate planning visions on the development of rural areas in urbanising and urbanised contexts;
- coalitions of stakeholders concerning these story lines – or the organisational aspects of planning in the complex societal context of rural areas in urbanising and urbanised contexts;
- the institutionalisation of story lines on ‘rurality near the city’ in spatial planning practice – or the balance between zoning, development and management of rural areas in urbanising and urbanised contexts.

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2. PLANNING STORY LINES ON 'RURALITY NEAR THE CITY'

One of today's main objectives and focuses of Flemish spatial planning policy is the delineation of urban areas in zoning plans. New developments in housing, economic activities, services, ... are concentrated within this boundary of the urban area; beyond the 'line', new developments are severely restricted since these 'rural areas' should be safeguarded for forestry, nature and agriculture. However, the planning boundary between urban areas and rural areas becomes a practical problem in the context of 'rurality near the city'. Then, the question arises whether open spaces in the rural-urban fringe should be perceived and planned as essential parts of the urban tissue ... or, in contrast, whether (agriculture in) these open space fragments – maybe already economically under great pressure – should be artificially and to a certain extent hopelessly conserved (as agriculture is considered to be characteristic to rural areas). The first perspective on rurality near the city stresses its uniqueness: "The urban fringe is unique, in terms of both its mix of land uses and the characteristics of its landscapes. It is not merely an extension of town into country, or a transitional aberration delaying the onset of real countryside: it is that land lying between urban areas and countryside with its own separate and frequently unique characteristics." (Gallent et al., 2004: 221-223) The second perspective focuses on the transitory character of rurality near the city: "The urban fringe is best thought of not just as a geographic area within a metropolitan region, but also as a step in the development hierarchy between rural areas and a central city. (...) It is not easy to say exactly where the suburbs end and the fringe begins, partly because many sections of fringe are in the process of turning into suburbs." (Daniels, 1999, p. 10-11) Where the second scenario embroiders on the familiar abrupt distinction in spatial planning between city and countryside, the first one creates possibilities to try and apply more 'urban' spatial concepts to the design and planning of rural areas near the city. Open space in an urbanising and urbanised context could be considered and conceived as a kind of public space, making use of concepts and ideas about the design and planning of green public space in an urban context (parks, parkways, ...). (Leinfelder, 2007)

Participants in the workshop confirmed the ongoing general process of rural areas to be taken or integrated into the city. These rural areas are just waiting to become urban, not to be built on but to become an essential part of the urban tissue and functioning. Ignoring these rural areas in spatial planning is a double waste: they are permanently lost for the traditional functions and activities of the countryside on the one hand and they don't play any role of significance in the city. Delineating urban areas in spatial planning makes abstraction of the existence of such in-between or hybrid landscapes. Planning processes should be turned upside down ... or, as one participant stated ... decision makers should act as children would – not really knowing what it is or what dogmas already exist - and combine at each specific spot the best of both (urban and rural) worlds instead of applying one general format of delineation. A worth mentioning remark of one of the participants in this debate was that, where North-West-European spatial planners approach rurality near the city from a urban extension perspective, other parts of Europe are confronted with shrinking cities and industrial and residential brown fields offer new perspectives to bring rurality closer to the city again! Striking was the unanimity about

the need for more spatial planning in rural-urban fringes as these are the contact areas between the high dynamic city and the low dynamic countryside.

Conceptually the idea or concept of open space as public space creates innovative possibilities. As often, this concept for 'rurality near the city' is however a very 'urban' approach, converting rural areas into park-like areas because of the overwhelming majority of people living in urban areas compared to rural areas. The apparent focus on morphological issues, related to this concept, was considered as another possible pitfall for 'open space as public space'. Participants also suggested to dare approaching 'rurality near the city' from a rural viewpoint and, for instance, support 'real' farmers in the fringe. What should be avoided by all means according to workshop participants is to conserve open space fragments as Disney theme parks with horsemen and hobby farmers as a setting for urban dwellers.

3. COALITIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS ON 'RURILITY NEAR THE CITY'

The number of and variety in users of rural areas near the city increases steadily. Also the variety in often opposite meanings given to these rural areas increases. Just think of the NIMBY-adepts who contest any new development in the surroundings of their renovated former farm houses versus the younger generation that looks for active leisure and/or agritainment (farm golf, ...) in the countryside. The water between both groups is undoubtedly very deep. Also the unfamiliarity of new rural, daily commuting dwellers with customs and needs of traditional or modern farmers is striking. This mutual ignorance is for Amdam (2006) a reason to stress the urgent need for a revival of social capital in the countryside. Challenges in rural areas near the city should be considered as opportunities to strengthen the social capital – the exchange of knowledge, the consolidation of relations and the development of mobilising capacity – between private entrepreneurs, governments and citizens. Is this growth of social capital compatible with the traditional top-down malleability feeling of planners: "Planners and designers (and policy makers) like to believe in the notion that 'plans' can change reality". (Van den Broeck, 2006: 12) ... or should this social capacity building be stimulated bottom-up: "The preparation of a strategy is about building the capacity of community groups to take more responsibility for and to achieve greater success with their collective efforts." (Murray & Greer, 1998: 264)

The Copenhagen case that was presented in the morning session proves that some form of top-down planning, especially for large scale preservation of rural areas near the city is necessary: if you don't plan it, it is destroyed. The small scale mixed land use in Flemish landscape however could perhaps ask for a more bottom-up approach since a generic spatial planning approach is difficult to be developed in such conditions.

Until now, Flemish spatial planning is very top-down. Not only do these top-down planning initiatives often fail, they are also very difficult for local governments to have impact on: there is often only a very little playing ground left for own initiatives since rules at the provincial or Flemish level are too strict, for instance concerning multiple land use. The main reason for this dominant top-down approach in Flemish spatial

planning remains a certain disbelief and distrust: bottom-up is a very nice concept in theory but, in practice, there is a lack of tradition and a very individualistic behaviour. Examples in Enschede, the Netherlands, and in the dike project Sigma in Flanders however show that changes in planning methodology are possible. There is a planning potential at the bottom level when people see that there is something in it for them too ... when individual (residential or economic) developments are made possible if people contribute to more general needs (landscape, nature conservation, ...). These creative planning processes are often obstructed by too many and too specific rules at higher policy levels. Maybe a vision on rurality near the city should be developed bottom-up, starting from very specific situations and creating common visions, and rules should then be implemented top-down, someone argued ... although climate change and other mega societal developments ask for more centralised visions.

4. INSTITUTIONALISATION OF 'RURALITY NEAR THE CITY'

Besides delineating urban areas, Flemish spatial planning also delineates agricultural and natural areas in zoning plans. Although almost everyone knows that an exclusive use of agricultural areas by professional agriculture is utopian, government and planners seem to stick to monofunctional zoning: "Public authorities often claim to preserve land for agricultural purposes when in fact the real motive is preserving open space that will fulfil multiple functions." (Meyer-Cech & Seher, 2005: 1). Zoning of multifunctional rural areas near the city could also be 're-invented', no longer start from a need to allocate functions and activities to well-defined zones but from a more holistic point of view such as landscape quality: "Potential for landscape to provide an integrative framework for wider practices of spatial planning." (Selman, 2006: 2)

Enschede in the Netherlands (www.hoe-zo.nl) has already felt the need to develop a combination of planning approaches for its countryside. On the one hand there is still a need for traditional passive regulatory planning, guaranteeing a pressure in certain areas to develop through zoning. On the other hand the actual conditions for the development of these areas should be described in a more conditional and qualitative way, opening possibilities for a more active and negotiable form of development planning. These conditions could for instance be formulated in the form of 'atmospheres' wished for instead of in urbanistic rules.

Other participants refer to the growing number of assessments that interfere with planning nowadays and in a certain way already guarantee a more holistic, crossing-over way of planning taking into account for instance ecological and environmental aspects. Nevertheless, a challenge seems a better interrelation between zoning, development and management of rural areas where the latter are often addressed too late or simply missing.